

Residents have kept open space part of the landscape

By Laurie Croal
For The Patriot Ledger

DUXBURY — More than 100 years ago, a small group of residents became concerned about preserving the town's forests and water supplies.

The same concern exists today.

The town has no massive shopping centers, industrial parks or crowded downtown business areas. Instead, residents are served by four small business districts.

Acres of woodlands, wetlands, salt marshes and open fields have become a permanent part of the landscape, protected from development by zoning laws.

Duxbury's character has its origins in the late 1800s. A conservation movement started in town when the Rural Society, now the Rural and Historical Society, began to buy small parcels of land, said Judi Barrett, a member of the open space and recreation advisory committee.

For decades, the town had been mired in the poverty that set in when its shipbuilding industry died. It was just beginning to find new wealth in the resorts and summer cottages that began springing up along the shore.

"The climate that had set in — this is a precious place and we'll do what we can to keep it — stayed," Barrett said.

During the early 1900s, the population slowly grew, but the town did not have to endure its first major building boom until 1945.

After World War II, when Duxbury's growth paralleled that of other South Shore communities, town officials were ready.

In 1925, the town was one of the first in the state to establish a planning board, at about the same time a group of residents bought Duxbury Beach to save it from development.

And in 1944, Duxbury was in the forefront of zoning law development.

"We had a planning board before words like 'comprehensive planning' had become a part of the jargon," Barrett said. "That really has been characteristic of a lot that has happened here."

Town action to protect resources continued at a steady pace.

In the 1950s, officials began to work on a master plan. In 1960, the conservation commission was established to "pick up at the



File photo

Duxbury's salt marshes benefited from the town's early efforts to preserve open space.

public level what was being done by private groups," and in 1969, the town became the first in the state to incorporate a 'greenbelt' into its master plan, Barrett said.

Under the leadership of conservation commission Chairman Lansing Rennett, town meeting bought land every year between 1965 and 1978, Barrett said.

Besides Duxbury Beach, a 7-mile-long peninsula between the bay and the sea, the town and non-profit organizations hold more than 2,000 acres of protected open space, Barrett said.

The North Hill Wildlife Sanctuary is owned by the Massachusetts Audubon Society. Boys and Girls Camp Inc. owns 615-acre Camp Wing, and the Rural and Historical Society owns about 175 acres.

The town owns nearly 1,000 acres of conservation land — bought under the greenbelt plan developed in 1969. It follows the wetlands area from Island Creek up through central Duxbury toward the South River's headwaters in the northwest. It became known as the east/central/west greenbelt plan.

"Throughout this time, there had been a

great deal of public support and massive expenditures," Barrett said.

There also had been a spurt in new home construction that surpassed the post-war building boom. Between 1965 — shortly after Route 3 was completed — and 1980, its population doubled, jumping from 6,211 to 12,063.

The town began looking for new ways to curb the grid subdivisions that were sprouting up all over town and to preserve the land without having to spend taxpayers' dollars.

In 1973, Duxbury became the first town in the country to enact a cluster zoning law that allowed condominiums, apartments and single-family homes to be built on smaller lots if open space were preserved in land trusts, planning board Chairman Sara Wilson said. Town meeting debate lasted for three nights before it passed.

"The town was going through the greatest growth in its history, the tax rate was forecast to double every five years, we were building a new school every few years, and capital indebtedness was growing," Wilson said.

"It came out of almost a crisis situation," she

said. "People wanted to buy land. Because the pace of development was so heavy, we felt we had to set aside land quickly, and the planning board wanted to take a better look at growth management."

For five years, the new bylaw complemented the town's open land purchases. Then, in 1978 when a 4½ percent tax cap was established, it became the town's primary defense against overdevelopment. Two years later, Proposition 2½ was enacted and town purchases ground to a halt.

Although the bylaw was popular at first and is credited with saving about 300 acres of open space, developers, residents and potential buyers have become disenchanted with it, and it has been used less often in the 1980s.

But the conservation movement has been reborn in the last few years.

"All this population had moved in," Barrett said. "They had bought houses and didn't want it to change, but it was changing. A movement really boomed here about growth at the citizen's level."

Last year, voters at town meeting overwhelmingly approved a Proposition 2½ override to buy 125 acres for \$3.4 million.

"It got the land acquisition movement going again," Barrett said. "You either buy it now or forget it, because the landowner is not going to sit forever if he has an opportunity to legitimately realize a profit."

At the same time, town officials were changing their views about how much protected space should be in Duxbury.

"We pretty much abandoned the idea of only an east/central/west greenbelt," Barrett said. "We want to shoot for a way of linking everything, but not necessarily buying everything."

Instead, the town will try to obtain easements over private property for walking trails.

Last year, Duxbury became the first Massachusetts town to have a Bay Circuit Plan approved by the state.

The plan would link wetlands, historical areas and open lands on the town's boundaries with similar sites in neighboring communities.

Barrett and other town officials are working on brochures that will tell residents the locations and uses of the recreation space in Duxbury.